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New York

President:	Sheikh Al Sabah	(Kuwait)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Llorentty Soliz
	China	Mr. Ma Zhaoxu
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Tanoh-Boutchoue
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Temenov
	Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Hickey
	United States of America	Ms. Eckels-Currie

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 12.10 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator to participate in this meeting.

Mr. Lowcock is joining the meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: My colleagues and I have given the Security Council a lot of updates on the situation in eastern Ghouta over the past three months. I want to start today by bringing members some voices directly from eastern Ghouta. The Office of the Special Envoy in Geneva has, just in the past three days, received thousands of messages on instant messaging applications from civilians there. They are pleading for help. Here is one of them, from a humanitarian worker in the area — a person well versed in international humanitarian law:

> "During the past two months, military operations turned into a process of systematic targeting of civilians. Most air raids have intentionally targeted civilian residential buildings. Whole families have died under the rubble. Today, and as battles intensify, I call on you, as a father now expecting my first child to be born, and as a humanitarian worker trying to maintain what is left of life, to act to stop the systematic operations against civilians and open the roads for humanitarian assistance."

Here are more voices.

> "There are entire families being targeted. A mother and her three children. Four pregnant women; one died, another is in a critical condition, the third lost her baby, and the fourth is under observation. A young girl lost both eyes, and it is continuing."
>
> "We do not want war, we do not want war, we do not want war."
>
> "Can you hear our messages, voices and fear?"
>
> "Our situation is so tragic. Our basements are not safe and lack basic needs. Help us, be with us."
>
> "Instead of saying 'no more', the world is saying 'one more.'"

As representatives of Member States, all here aware that their obligations under international humanitarian law are just that — they are binding obligations. They are not favours to be traded in a game of death and destruction. Humanitarian access is not a nice-to-have; it is a legal requirement. Counterterrorism efforts cannot supersede the obligation to respect and protect civilians. They do not justify the killing of civilians and the destruction of entire cities and neighbourhoods.

The Council has been briefed in minute detail, month after month, on the scale of the suffering of the Syrian people. Our reports have indeed been endless: dead and injured children, women and men; airstrikes, mortars, rockets, barrel bombs, cluster munitions, chemical weapons, thermite bombs, suicide bombs, snipers, double-tap attacks on civilians and the essential infrastructure they depend on, including hospitals and schools; rape, illegal detention, torture, child recruitment and sieges of entire cities reminiscent of medieval times.

Over the past 24 hours, heavy shelling and aerial bombardment of multiple communities in eastern Ghouta have reportedly continued, resulting in the deaths of at least 50 people and wounding at least 200. According to some sources, the total death toll since 19 February is close to 300 people. Twenty-three attacks on vital civilian infrastructure have been reported since 19 February. At least seven health facilities were reportedly hit on 21 February. The only primary health-care centre in Modira town was reportedly rendered out of service by airstrikes. A hospital in Duma city sustained significant damage from nearby barrel bombs. Also in Duma city, an obstetrics centre was damaged A hospital in Jisrein town was reportedly attacked, resulting in the death of a nurse. The two Syrian Arab Red Crescent centres in Duma city and Harasta town were reportedly damaged

by the bombardment. Meanwhile — and this is also a point I have consistently emphasized — mortar shelling from eastern Ghouta is reportedly killing and injuring scores of civilians in Damascus city, too.

Members all know the statistics of this conflict. They know that half the Syrian population has either fled the country or faced repeated internal displacement. These people have lost everything. They have seen their homes destroyed, their neighbours killed, their loved ones disappear. Everyone knows that the repeated confirmed or alleged chemical attacks in Syria have killed and terrorized Syrian civilians.

Eastern Ghouta is a living example of an entirely known, predictable and preventable humanitarian disaster unfolding before our eyes. Everyone knows that nearly 400,000 people are besieged and that they have been besieged for more than four years. Everyone knows that in eastern Ghouta thousands upon thousands of children are facing acute malnutrition the likes of which we have not seen elsewhere in Syria since the onset of the conflict. Everyone knows that more than 700 people are in need of urgent medical evacuation to hospitals just miles away in Damascus city.

We have all seen in recent days the images of bombs and mortars raining down on bakeries and medical facilities. According to reports documented by United Nations human rights colleagues, at least 346 civilians have been killed since the beginning of this month and close to 900 people have been injured. Members all heard the Secretary-General yesterday, in the Chamber, describing eastern Ghouta as "hell on Earth" and saying that we cannot "allow things to go on happening in this horrendous way". They also heard him pleading for "the immediate suspension of all war activities in eastern Ghouta" (*S/PV.8185, p. 2*).

Earlier this week, UNICEF issued a blank statement, as it could no longer find the words to describe the brutality of this war. Its only message was that "no words will do justice to the children killed, their mothers, their fathers and their loved ones."

This appalling violence is happening as we face significantly increased constraints on our ability to reach people trapped behind conflict lines. In recent months we have encountered greater difficulties in accessing people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas, particularly through cross-line convoys, than during any period since 2015. Since 1 December, for nearly three months, we have been able to deploy only three cross-line convoys, reaching just 67,200 people. Only 7,200 of those people were in besieged areas, less than 2 per cent of the overall besieged population. In 2017, through November, approximately 53 cross-line convoys reached people in need, an average of nearly five convoys per month. A cumulative total of nearly 2 million people were reached in the first 11 months of 2017, or around 175,000 people per month. Therefore in 2017 we reached 175,000 a month; in the past three months we have reached 22,000 a month. Those are not reports or allegations. We have complete, factual information on this, because they are our convoys.

Moreover, the 2017 access levels were themselves nearly 40 per cent below our access levels in 2016. Access is not only limited on aid deliveries, but we are also seeing growing challenges to our ability to independently assess needs on the ground and to monitor aid delivery.

When an entire generation is robbed of its future, when hospital attacks have become the new normal, when sieges of entire cities and neighbourhoods have become a lasting reality for hundreds of thousands of people, the international community must take urgent and concrete action. I have said this before and I will say it again. What we need is a sustained cessation of hostilities, and we need it desperately — a cessation of violence that will enable the immediate, safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and services, the evacuation of the critically sick and wounded and an alleviation of the suffering of the Syrian people.

The Council can still save lives in eastern Ghouta, and elsewhere in Syria. I urge it to do so. Millions of battered and beleaguered children, women and men depend on meaningful action by the Council.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We are grateful to you, Mr. President, for the prompt response to our delegation's proposal to convene a special meeting on the situation in eastern Ghouta, in Syria. That certainly does not mean that other problematic areas require any less attention. In particular, not long ago, at our initiative, the Security Council discussed the dire situation in Raqqa in detail.

And in general, over the past month we have revisited Syria's humanitarian issues more than once. I would like to ask Council members to listen carefully to what I have to say.

It is past time to discuss frankly what is going on in this Damascus suburb. The mass psychosis in global media outlets of the past few days, working in coordination to circulate all the same rumours, is certainly not contributing to an understanding of the situation. When eastern Aleppo was in the news, propagandistic disaster scenarios were put forward for it — a city where, after it was liberated from the terrorists, warehouses full of medicines and medical equipment were discovered. At the time we demanded that the Secretariat conduct an investigation, but the report presented to the Security Council was blatantly superficial.

We are constantly seeing images of the activities of the White Helmets, who pass themselves off as rescuers. They were long ago shown to be supported by generous foreign assistance, and they work closely with terrorist groups. As a general rule, they serve as the original sources of well-rewarded disinformation. We are given the impression that the whole of eastern Ghouta consists of nothing but hospitals and that it is the hospitals that the Syrian army is attacking. That is a well-known tactic in information warfare. It is a very well-known fact, however, that the militants everywhere make a habit of locating their military facilities in medical and educational institutions, but for some reason that inconvenient truth is not advertised.

It would be a good idea to begin with the fact that there are still several thousand defiant militants in eastern Ghouta, including some affiliated with terrorist organizations, mainly Jabhat Al-Nusra. Some time ago, they breached the agreement on a cessation of hostilities with an attack on an armoured tank unit of the Syrian armed forces in Harasta. They are shelling Damascus, and the intensity of the attacks increases daily. Dozens of missiles are launched every day, and not a single area of the capital has been spared. For some reason, those statistics are not being taken into account by United Nations representatives, although the Permanent Mission of Syria distributes them regularly. We have pointed out that in a 20 February statement, an official representative of the Secretary-General described factual information as "reported" (see S/PV.8183). And today the Under-Secretary-General talked about reported shelling. But those reports could easily have been verified by United Nations staff if they had inspected the areas of destruction and visited the victims.

The Russian Embassy facilities have been repeatedly shelled, and each time the same delegations in the Security Council have made up excuses to lay off the blame for these terrorist acts. One is compelled to conclude that someone is purposely helping the criminals avoid accountability. Incidentally, we are disturbed by the fact that not so long ago, representatives of some delegations who view themselves as leaders in the protection of human rights and international humanitarian law quite seriously said that the damage resulting from the shelling in Damascus did not reach a level deserving of the attention given to eastern Ghouta. Our immediate response was to ask how many people have to die to attain, as it were, the gold standard of sympathy? There has been no answer. Is it appropriate to pass over the tragedies in Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul and Raqqa in silence while drumming up hysteria about Madaya, Daraya, eastern Aleppo and eastern Ghouta, encouraging militants to to further humiliate civilians?

Incidentally, the coalition forces' methodical destruction of Raqqa is extremely recent. The memory of it is hardly likely to have faded so quickly. For some reason, when the Coalition bombing flattened Raqqa, no one sounded the alarm, demanded compliance with international humanitarian law or proposed an immediate ceasefire. Yes, the Coalition smoked the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) out of Raqqa. We know that. But with that done, the United States has forgotten about the city. No one is clearing any mines there. Who is aware of the fact that as many as 50 returning civilians are blown up by mines in Raqqa every day? Nor do we see much enthusiasm from these famous activists about the worst humanitarian crisis of our time, which happens to be unfolding against the backdrop of the armed conflict in Yemen.

The militants have turned the people who are left in eastern Ghouta into hostages who are not allowed to leave the area under rebel control through the Al-Wafideen checkpoint. The Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides has urged the illegal groups to lay down their arms and resolve their status, but they broke off negotiations yesterday, on 21 February. It is quite obvious that they do not care about the life and safety of the residents of eastern Ghouta, whom they use as human shields to hide behind. Their aim consists of continuing to negotiate

tactical and logistical advantages for themselves. That does not seem to particularly worry these groups' foreign sponsors, who might be able to exert crucial influence on them. But no, they would rather maintain the status quo and organize loud campaigns blackening Syria and Russia.

Energy is also being wasted on fragmenting the international efforts regarding a settlement in Syria. Instead of giving due backing to the Astana de-escalation process and the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi, which have become an important support to the inter-Syrian negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva, we see ongoing backroom efforts designed to openly undermine the work being done through those platforms. On top of that, exclusive clubs are being created, one striking example of which is the so-called International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, which undermines the established frameworks for international cooperation on non-proliferation. We know that preparations are being made for an unofficial presentation of that initiative in Geneva. We would like to reaffirm our position in that regard, which is that in view of the neutral status of respected international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, representatives of their secretariats should not be associated with narrow initiatives such as these, which do not enjoy universal support.

Many are now asking the logical question of how de-escalation in eastern Ghouta and other problematic areas of Syria can be achieved as soon as possible. The delegations of Sweden and Kuwait have come up with their recipe for this, in their role as informal monitors of the humanitarian dimension of the Syrian conflict in the Security Council. Their draft resolution — which has now been officially prepared for a vote, despite the fact that the authors know perfectly well that there is no agreement on it — proposes an apparently simple idea, which is the establishment of a ceasefire throughout Syria for not less than 30 days. We would very much like to know how such a truce will be guaranteed, but we have had no intelligible answers. The important thing, they say, is adopting the decision, and we can come up with the details later. An issue as complex as the Syrian conflict does not respond to such logic. We have been through this before, including, once again, in the case of eastern Aleppo.

In principle, a ceasefire would be extremely significant, and not just for ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid. The challenge is in how to achieve it. What we need here is not resolutions for the sake of resolutions, but measures that correspond to the realities on the ground. We are constantly talking about ensuring that the Security Council agrees on feasible decisions that are not divorced from reality or that cater to populist demands. This is about the credibility of the principal organ of the United Nations, responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security, in accordance with the Charter, whose purposes and principles we were discussing only yesterday. If we could stop the violence in crisis zones with resolutions, we would already be living in a completely different world.

It will take long and hard work with the sides to the conflict to stabilize the situation so that the parties can sit down at the negotiating table and come up with the parameters for a ceasefire. There is no other way. It will also be impossible to ensure on paper that in 48 hours, or any other amount of time, humanitarian convoys can get going and mass medical evacuations begin. By the way, specific parameters for normalizing a number of complex issues are currently being formulated in Geneva, including by using the potential of the specialist International Syria Support Group. They include the Rukban camp for displaced persons — where, we understand, the United States military presence occupying the area has finally given the United Nations written guarantees — the Yarmouk camp, where the ISIL terrorists still have a presence, and the Fua and Kefraya enclaves.

In that connection, I would like to know if the authors of today's initiative genuinely do not understand its utopian nature or if there is some other purpose at work here that has nothing to do with a desire to help struggling Syrians. Unfortunately, the story of eastern Aleppo in 2016 suggests that the second is true, and that the aim is to start a fight so as to strengthen international pressure on the Syrian authorities and slander Russia. Besides that, it shifts the focus from the importance of reviving the Geneva process as quickly as possible on the basis of the agreements that the Syrians arrived at in Sochi to indiscriminate accusations against the Syrian Government. Will that improve Geneva's chances of success?

I will say it again to make sure that everyone hears it one more time. Russia will continue to do everything

possible to achieve peace in Syria and restore stability to the Middle East. We call on our partners to do the same in a spirit of constructive cooperation and in cooperation with the United Nations, rather than continuing to sow confusion, ramp up support for jihadists and tear the region apart. For this draft resolution to be meaningful and realistic, the Russian delegation has prepared some amendments to it that we will now circulated to Council members.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): I would like to thank the Russian Federation for calling for a meeting on the horrendous situation in eastern Ghouta, and Mr. Mark Lowcock for his briefing. I will now make some brief remarks on behalf of Sweden and Kuwait.

In seven years of war, the situation in the besieged area of eastern Ghouta has never been worse. I would like to thank the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for another briefing reminding us of the horrific reality for citizens in eastern Ghouta and of the Council's responsibilities. Yesterday, in this Chamber, the Secretary-General said that the 400,000 inhabitants of eastern Ghouta live in hell on earth. His appeal to all of us in the Council was to act — to immediately suspend all war activities in eastern Ghouta, allowing for humanitarian aid to reach all of those in need, allowing for the evacuation of the hundreds of people that need urgent treatment and that cannot be provided for and allowing the possibility for other civilians to be effectively treated. I want to take this opportunity to remind all parties, as Mark Lowcock just did, of their obligations under international law to protect civilians and hospitals and other medical facilities.

The co-penholders, Sweden and Kuwait, have put forward a draft resolution to respond to the constant legitimate calls from the United Nations for a nationwide cessation of hostilities for 30 days in order to allow for humanitarian access and emergency medical evacuations. Our draft resolution also calls for the lifting of the siege directed against eastern Ghouta. We plead to all Council members to come together to support the draft resolution and to urgently adopt it so that we can halt the incessant attacks against eastern Ghouta and beyond, and we can avert a situation that is beyond words in its desperation.

We, Sweden and Kuwait, furthermore urge the parties to the de-escalation agreement in eastern Ghouta to comply and implement it. We call upon the Astana guarantors — Russia, Iran and Turkey — to spare no effort and bring all their influence to bear on the parties to that end to avert the human disaster unfolding before our eyes.

In response to our Russian colleague on our draft resolution, the United Nations convoys and evacuation teams are ready to go, subject to standard security procedures. The draft resolution that we are putting forward is not a comprehensive peace deal. Its aim is a much-needed humanitarian pause for an initial period of 30 days. There are already ceasefire agreements in force for the areas where fighting has escalated the most recently. They must be complied with. There are existing monitoring mechanisms that can be utilized. The role of the Council, I believe, is to push the parties to the conflict to comply with the proposed cessation of hostilities. Compliance is on the shoulders of the parties. I think that we can make a difference, and I think that we are tested today — not just as Ambassadors representing our countries, but as human beings. That is a massive responsibility.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his briefing today. The remarks in Mr. Lowcock's statements are in line with the Secretary-General's remarks yesterday morning (see S/PV.8185) — that eastern Ghouta can wait no longer. There is tremendous suffering there, with 400,000 people who are living hell on Earth.

We support all what the Permanent Representative of Sweden, Mr. Skoog, said in his statement on behalf of Kuwait and Sweden as co-penholders of the humanitarian dossier in Syria. It is unfortunate that the number of people killed since the beginning of this month in eastern Ghouta has reached 1,200 civilians. The international community is silent; it stands still. The question here is: How long we are going to remain silent? How many more civilians, women, children and elderly must die or be displaced until the international community starts taking action and speaking in one voice and saying enough — enough carnage and grave violations of human rights law and international human law? In that regard, I would like to make the following points.

First, Kuwait and Sweden, in response to the clear-cut demands of the United Nations on the humanitarian situation in Syria, have jointly submitted a simple and clear draft resolution that demands a cessation of hostilities across Syria for a 30-day period in order for the United Nations and its partners to be able to deliver humanitarian aid and services and provide critical medical evacuation to the sick and wounded, in accordance with the provisions of international law, and end the blockade on residential areas.

Secondly, action on the part of the the State of Kuwait is based on our religious and national duty to our brothers in Syria. We have a legal, human and ethical responsibility to end their suffering. In that connection, we call on all Member States to support the draft resolution and vote in its favour. We should rise above our political differences to protect civilians.

Thirdly, a failure to ende the systematic and horrendous carnage and bloodshed that has continued for seven years with various weapons would only serve to encourage the perpetuation of such crimes without accountability, as those who commit them are heartened by impunity.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

Ms. Eckels-Currie (United States of America): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing, particularly his noting of the systematic targeting of civilians in eastern Ghouta and the toll that it is taking on the people there.

Yesterday, Russia's Permanent Representative requested this meeting in order to "make sure that all parties can present their views". The view that Mr. Lowcock presented today is, as the Secretary-General said and others have repeated, one of hell on Earth for the people of eastern Ghouta. I would also like to share the vision of some of the people of eastern Ghouta.

Bilal is 22 years old, with a wife who is five months pregnant. He says, "We are waiting our turn to die; this is the only thing I can say". Abdullah is a construction worker, with a wife and six children. He says,

> "Bombs were falling everywhere near our house. We have been spending the last week digging into the rubble of nearby areas with our bare hands."

Malik is a doctor treating the wounded. He says,

> "The hospitals have been overflowing with blood. We are doing what we can to help, but the situation is becoming unbearable."

Those are just a few of the overwhelming number of horrific stories coming out of eastern Ghouta everyday. The pictures and videos are everywhere — screaming parents digging through rubble to find their children; doctors working frantically with no medicine and no equipment in underground hospitals to save whoever they can. Those are not terrorists showing up in these makeshift emergency rooms — they are civilians. They are ordinary people, under attack by a barbaric Al-Assad regime that is bent on levelling eastern Ghouta to the ground, with no regard for the 400,000 men, women and children who live there.

No one needs to use their imagination to know what the Al-Assad regime is planning. It is exactly what we saw in Aleppo in 2016, and in Hama and Homs before that. The Al-Assad regime wants to bomb or starve of all of its opponents into submission. That is why, except for two small deliveries of aid, the regime has not allowed any medical convoys or deliveries of food into eastern Ghouta since November, and the bombing attacks have been relentless. The regime wants to keep bombing and gassing these 400,000 people, and the Al-Assad regime is counting on Russia to make sure the Council is unable to stop their suffering.

Yesterday the Russian representative asked for the parties to present their views, and has put forward a deeply cynical one today. Those present have now also heard from the United Nations humanitarian leader and from people, like Bilal, Abdullah and Malik. The assault from the regime is relentless, and the suffering is overwhelming. The Russian Permanent Representative also asked that we "come up with ways of getting out of the situation." Yet it appears to be intent on blocking any meaningful effort to do so.

None of us on the Council need to look very far for the way out. Thanks to the tireless efforts of our colleagues from Kuwait and Sweden, the way is sitting in front of us. We have a draft resolution establishing a 30-day ceasefire to help shield the people of eastern Ghouta and allow for deliveries of food and medicine to arrive. All 15 of us have spent the past three weeks negotiating that text, patiently attempting to work with each other, including the Russian delegation. We believed we had an agreed text. There are no surprises here. The United

States is ready to vote on the draft resolution — right here and right now. All of us should be ready. Sweden and Kuwait have consulted everyone on that text. They have done their part. There is no reason to delay. Literally, the minute this meeting ends, the Council can take the clearest possible step to help — vote for a ceasefire and vote for humanitarian access.

What the people of Eastern Ghouta need is not complicated, and do not just take our word for it. The International Committee of the Red Cross head of delegation in Syria summed it up, "This is madness and it has to stop". The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid, asked,

> "How much cruelty will it take before the international community can speak with one voice to say enough dead children, enough wrecked families, enough violence, and take resolute concerted action to bring this monstrous campaign of annihilation to an end?"

UNICEF can hardly put words on a page. All UNICEF said in a haunting statement was, "No words will do justice to the children killed, their mothers, their fathers and their loved ones". The Secretary-General made his point clearly yesterday. He supports the cessation of hostilities because eastern Ghouta cannot wait.

Yesterday Russia's Permanent Representative asked what we should do about eastern Ghouta. The people of eastern Ghouta, United Nations officials, humanitarian and human rights leaders and, indeed, pretty much the entirety of the Council have answered: stop the bombing of eastern Ghouta and allow medical assistance in. The rest of the Council is ready to act. We urge the Council to move forward with the ceasefire and humanitarian draft resolution immediately.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Russia for its initiative in convening this meeting. I also thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing.

Recently, the security situation in parts of Syria, including its capital, Damascus, and the eastern Ghouta region, has escalated, causing significant civilian casualties, which is drawing broad attention from the international community. China would like to express its profound sympathy to the Syrian people for their suffering. We condemn all acts of violence that target civilians and civilian facilities and harm innocent lives. China has always believed that there is no military solution to the Syrian issue; it would only aggravate the suffering of the Syrian people. A political settlement is the only way out.

The present situation is now such that the international community needs to support the Syrian parties in the resumption of dialogue and negotiations under the United Nations mediation as soon as possible and in seeking a solution that is accepted by all parties through a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political process. That is the only way to fundamentally ease the humanitarian situation in Syria and rid the Syrian people of their suffering at an early date.

Terrorist organizations are still launching attacks in Syria, which have caused significant civilian casualties and impeded humanitarian relief efforts by the United Nations. The international community should strengthen its cooperation on counter-terrorism, adopt unified standards and resolutely combat all terrorist organizations designated as such by the Security Council.

As part of the Syrian issue, the humanitarian aspect in the country is closely linked to Syria's overall situation, in addition to its political process. Actions taken by the Security Council on Syria's humanitarian issue should not only help ease the overall humanitarian situation in the country, but also help consolidate the momentum for a ceasefire in Syria and be conducive to the bigger picture of a political settlement to the issue. China calls upon the Security Council to remain united on the issue of Syria, speak with one voice and create favourable conditions for substantive progress in Syria's political process at an early date.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock for his enlightening briefing of the situation of the inhabitants of eastern Ghouta. Mr. Lowcock has said it all — the torrent of fire that is indiscriminately falling eastern Ghouta is relentlessly pushing the limits of horror and human suffering. There are no words to describe what is taking place in eastern Ghouta as we speak.

The regime is not merely bombing its own people. It is methodically targeting hospitals and vital infrastructure for the population with the macabre aim of ensuring that the injured who have not perished during the shelling do not survive the wounds inflicted upon them. We must insist that the attacks against hospitals and health-care personnel constitute war crimes, and the perpetrators must be held accountable.

The reports we have received from non-governmental organizations and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights are unbearable. Twenty eight attacks struck 20 hospitals in eastern Ghouta since January. More than 700 individuals are in need of urgent medical evacuation. Those evacuations are systematically blocked by the Damascus regime, which has been the case for months. More than 400,000 people, including 130,000 children, have been besieged for months by the regime as part of a siege that is reminiscent of the Middle Ages.

We should make no mistake: the Syrian regime and its allies are brandishing the fight against jihadist fighters, the need for which no one is disputing, as justification of an offensive aimed at entirely different goals. Its real intentions are indeed to annihilate any and all opposition and break the morale of civilians by indiscriminately massacring them. The offensive against eastern Ghouta, which has seen an unbridled acceleration in recent years — the worst of which is undoubtedly yet to come — has added to both the methods and consequences of the new Aleppo. Let us recall that in that city the intensification of bombing preceded a reconquest operation and unknown levels of violence that never sought to shield civilians or rule out the use of chemical weapons. We shall be particularly vigilant on the latter.

Yesterday, through President Macron, France emphatically condemned the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas and civilian infrastructure. We called for the immediate establishment of a ceasefire to enable medical evacuations and humanitarian access to the people. The Secretary-General also spoke resolutely along the same lines. As was recalled this morning by the French Foreign Minister, Mr. Jean-Yves Le Drian, any lack of action is an indication of guilt. We must act swiftly, for the Council has the means at its disposal, if the willingness is put forth.

Sweden and Kuwait, the commitment of which France commends, have proposed a draft resolution demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities to enable humanitarians to evacuate the wounded and gain access to the people. The draft resolution before us does not seem to me to be a political judgement. It conveys the humanitarian imperative that, as such, must bring us together. Accordingly, we have noted Russia's intention to propose changes to the draft resolution. We will consider them, but it is crucial that we quickly adopt the draft resolution so that a cessation of hostilities takes place immediately, as addressing the situation on the ground is of the utmost urgency.

A cessation of hostilities is not a concession. It is the minimal form of response to the repeated requests of the United Nations and humanitarian actors, which have been communicated by members of the Council. Subsequently, it is up to the regime's supporters to ensure full respect and to respond to all calls for access to humanitarian assistance and medical evacuations under international humanitarian law. It is inconceivable to us that a Council member could be opposed to that.

At the same time, we must — and France stands ready to — redouble our efforts to establish a neutral environment that will allow for a credible political process and the holding of elections in Syria. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, France has consistently advocated for the priority of achieving a negotiated solution to the military situation and of finding a political solution that satisfies the aspirations of the Syrian people, ensures lasting peace and stops terrorism in its tracks. France will not deviate from the road map adopted by the international community. We have already said, and will say once again, that only a political, inclusive solution, established under the auspices of the United Nations through enabling a political transition within the framework of the Geneva process and resolution 2254 (2015), will end the suffering of the Syrian people in a credible and lasting manner.

I should like to conclude with both a warning and an appeal. Not only has the situation in Syria reverted to the tragic darkest hours of the crisis, but, if we fail to react robustly and immediately — let us make no mistake — the worst is yet to come. The worst is the endless escalation of the humanitarian crisis that is crushing the people, any semblance of humanity and the very values underpinning the United Nations. A widespread ground campaign directed against eastern Ghouta might well be the next deadly stage. The worst is also the expansion of the conflict. The combination of circumstances before us today might lead to a potentially major regional or even international confrontation. That risk must be taken very seriously.

In the name of our shared values and interests, I call on every member of the Council to join and act together. We owe that to the civilians who are dying by the hundreds in the hell in eastern Ghouta. We owe it to the security of the region and of the world, which

we have the collective responsibility to protect. We owe it to upholding the credibility of the United Nations, which is our shared heritage. Let us beware that the Syrian tragedy does not also become the grave of the United Nations.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Mr. Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his briefing today on the tragic situation facing the more than 400,000 people living in eastern Ghouta and in other cities.

We heard with dismay that, in that area, the basic principles of international humanitarian law and human rights continue to be disregarded. That has been evidenced by the incessant and merciless bombardments resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties — many of whom are women and children — on a daily basis. Far from decreasing, the bombardments have intensified over the past several days and weeks, as has been the case with regard to the number of people with urgent medical issues who are dying because they cannot be evacuated. We deeply regret that humanitarian convoys are unable to reach besieged and difficult-to-access areas, such as eastern Ghouta, among others, despite repeated appeals from the United Nations and various countries, including Peru, to facilitate immediate, safe and unrestricted access in eastern Ghouta, as well as other areas of Syria.

All those facts, which are ultimately allowing for and fuelling a hell on Earth, as the Under-Secretary-General just pointed out to us, warrant our strongest condemnation. We must remind all parties, including the Syrian authorities, of the responsibility to protect the civilian population. The United Nations has determined various actions that can be taken to alleviate the suffering of civilians in eastern Ghouta and other affected areas. We stress the importance of the immediate implementation of a 30-day cessation of hostilities to allow for providing aid and setting out and implementing the humanitarian assistance response plan and the five priorities that Mr. Lowcock mentioned. Those are all indispensable and urgently needed measures that Peru fully supports.

Implementing them will require a genuine political will to reverse direction and turn them into a reality. Accordingly, we thank Sweden and Kuwait for their generous efforts to reach a consensus on a draft resolution on a cessation of hostilities, which we hope can be adopted as soon as possible. It is of the utmost importance that Council members, in particular those who are able to exercise their influence on the ground, show the world their unity, sense of duty and willingness to compromise, and that we send a clear signal that prioritizes human beings over other interests.

The Council must be able to rise to the occasion and fulfil its sensitive and important responsibilities. All can count on my delegation's commitment to carrying out actions that will alleviate the human suffering in eastern Ghouta and throughout Syria.

Mr. Van Oosterom (Netherlands): We thank the presidency for convening this meeting, and I thank Mark Lowcock for his sobering briefing. I will address the following three points: first, the escalation of violence in eastern Ghouta; secondly, international humanitarian law; and, thirdly, action by the Security Council.

First, with regard to the escalation of violence in eastern Ghouta, we are meeting at a moment of grave distress for the people in eastern Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria. We have seen the extreme escalation of violence in Idlib and eastern Ghouta, which was initiated a few weeks ago by the Syrian regime and its allies. That has severely intensified over the past several days and continues without pause, as Mark Lowcock clearly described. We condemn all indiscriminate attacks directed against civilians. Communities in eastern Ghouta have experienced the most intense bombardments since the beginning of the siege in 2012. Mortars are also being fired into Damascus. Families do not have a safe place to hide. Women and children are dying. Last Monday, the United Nations reported, over a period of just 13 hours, at least, 92 civilian deaths in eastern Ghouta, and the total death toll since Monday appears to stand now at approximately 300.

We continue to receive reports of attacks on hospitals and of the renewed use of chemical weapons, thereby leading to the inhumane suffering of civilians and those who try to help them. We pay tribute to the humanitarian efforts of the White Helmets. We condemn targeted attacks against them. While the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian-populated areas continues, desperately needed humanitarian aid, including medical aid, for the people of eastern Ghouta cannot be delivered. We condemn the incessant violence and the barbaric tactics of besiegement. We have seen those tactics before. If we think back to Aleppo in December 2016, the same scenario took place. The regime turned

that city into an unlivable hell where civilians were imprisoned, constantly targeted from the air and cut off from any form of aid. The Council should not stand by and watch a repetition of such events in eastern Ghouta.

Secondly, concerning the erosion of international humanitarian law, in witnessing the sheer disregard for human life, we must ask ourselves: What has become of the hard-won gains in the area of international humanitarian law? The lack of compliance with the Geneva Conventions by parties to the Syrian conflict erodes the very norms enshrined therein. It also erodes the rules-based international order. We cannot let that happen. The carnage in Syria must stop. The Council must take effective, credible and decisive action today. The world is watching. We call upon all parties to the Syrian conflict, in particular the Syrian regime and its allies, to stop the targeting of civilians, stop the attacks on hospitals and facilitate immediate access for humanitarian organizations to deliver much needed aid.

That brings me to my third point, which is action by the Council on the cessation of hostilities. We thank penholders Kuwait and Sweden for negotiating a draft resolution during the past two weeks that addresses the dire situation in Syria. We pay tribute to the prudent, inclusive manner in which Sweden and Kuwait have organized negotiations on the draft resolution. We wholeheartedly support the Swedish-Kuwaiti appeal to support their text.

The draft resolution includes clear and implementable measures. We fully support an immediate cessation of hostilities in Syria to enable aid convoys to deliver food and medicines to all those in need, and the safe medical evacuation of the critically ill and wounded. That must happen as soon as possible. Parties to the Syrian conflict and those with influence on them have a heavy responsibility to assure the safety of humanitarian operations and to ensure that no forced evacuations of civilians take place.

In conclusion, some Council members say that the draft resolution cannot be implemented because it is not realistic. But with sufficient political will on the part of the parties involved in Syria, the cessation of hostilities can become a most urgently needed reality. The Council showed forceful action when it adopted resolution 2393 (2017) in December 2017 to alleviate the suffering in Syria by allowing for vital cross-border humanitarian aid. Let us again show forceful action. Let us prove to the world that we can agree to put the safety of civilians first, throughout Syria.

The human suffering in Syria, in particular in Ghouta, must end. We need a cessation of hostilities now. We call on the Russian Federation in particular to use its influence, do its utmost to achieve that objective and allow the Council to act effectively. Let us adopt the realistic, clear and balanced draft resolution as it stands, end the violence and allow access for humanitarian assistance.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): We thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his briefing. We appreciate his efforts and understand the challenges he faces.

We are deeply concerned about the military escalation in eastern Ghouta and its devastating impact on civilians. We are also equally concerned about escalating conflict in other parts of Syria. The continued reports of attacks against medical facilities, resulting in a number of civilian deaths and injuries, is indeed extremely worrying. We stress that it is absolutely imperative to protect civilians in eastern Ghouta and other affected areas.

Nonetheless, we should never overlook the fact that the capital, Damascus, is being shelled from eastern Ghouta — one of its suburbs. All the same, it is impossible to deny the fact that life-saving aid must reach all Syrians in need of urgent assistance. In that regard, while we welcome the fact that the United Nations inter-agency convoy delivered life-saving assistance to more than 7,000 persons on 14 February, we acknowledge that, given the severity of the humanitarian situation, it is obviously not enough.

To address humanitarian needs, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners should be allowed safe, improved and unhindered humanitarian access. As the Secretary-General recalled in his statement on 20 February and through his strong appeal yesterday in the Chamber (see S/PV.8185), a cessation of hostilities is desirable to enable humanitarian aid deliveries and medical evacuation. We see no problem with reaching a consensus on the matter. In that connection, members of the Council have been engaged in constructive discussions on how to ensure the implementation of a cessation of hostilities.

As the situation on the ground becomes increasingly complex, we understand that implementing a humanitarian pause will not be easy. We understand

the concerns of some in that regard. We do not ignore the possibility that terrorist elements might exploit that tool to advance their goals. It will require the political will and tangible cooperation, in good faith, of all Syrian actors, as well as of all States with influence over the parties. Let us not forget that the situation in Syria is becoming extremely complicated and that the humanitarian situation has not remained unaffected. We are extremely worried about the current trajectory.

As a human tragedy unfolds before our very eyes, it is expected that the Council will take meaningful, collective action that could help save lives on the ground. That is why we have reiterated that the Council should extend its unified support for the humanitarian work of the United Nations and its partners. Only by working together will the Council convey a strong and unified message that could help facilitate the much-needed humanitarian work of the United Nations and alleviate the continued suffering of the Syrians. In that regard, the humanitarian draft resolution will perhaps provide us with a good opportunity to demonstrate our resolve for concrete action. It may not be a perfect text but we believe it paves the way for all parties to coordinate their existing efforts to halt hostilities for the sake of civilians who are in an extremely difficult situation.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the two penholders Kuwait and Sweden, which have been working tirelessly to achieve a consensus outcome. We hope they will continue their much-appreciated efforts until the last minute to address the concerns — real, legitimate concerns — of all delegations.

Let me conclude by reiterating that the escalating violence in eastern Ghouta and other parts of Syria should reinforce the importance and urgency of finding a comprehensive political solution, without which the suffering of Syrians will continue unabated.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock for his briefing.

As our Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jacek Czaputowicz, stated yesterday with regard to eastern Ghouta, there is no justification for the indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians, including children, or on civilian infrastructure, such as health facilities. They must stop immediately and all parties to the conflict must strictly comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. We would like to stress that all actors should use their influence to bring about immediate and improved conditions on the ground.

Once again, we urgently call for the cessation of hostilities in the whole of Syria. Attacks against civilian targets, including medical facilities, must stop now in order to relieve the enormous and unreasonable suffering of the Syrian people. We therefore call upon all parties to alleviate the suffering of civilians, including children, by granting them urgent, free and safe access to humanitarian assistance.

With regard to the de-escalation zones, which include eastern Ghouta, I should recall that they were aimed at ensuring a ceasefire and humanitarian access in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law. In the light of this fact, I call on all parties engaged to respect their ceasefire-related commitments. I also call on States members of the Security Council to use their leverage on the parties in order to implement relevant previous commitments and to create conditions for a permanent ceasefire.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of maintaining the unity of the Council on the question of humanitarian access. We should find a mutually acceptable way to express a clear position of the Security Council in this regard. Accordingly, Poland would like to reiterate its support for the work of Sweden and Kuwait as penholders of the draft humanitarian resolution for Syria. Now more than ever do we need to make every possible effort to adopt the draft resolution as soon as possible. It is the Council's responsibility not to fail to stop the ongoing humanitarian tragedy in the eastern Ghouta.

Mr. Hickey (United Kingdom): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his very detailed and clear briefing today. It was very powerful to hear through him the voices of the people of eastern Ghouta.

Russia called this meeting today to allow us to present our understanding of the situation on the ground and come up with ways of getting out of the situation. We have heard very clearly from Under-Secretary-General Lowcock today and from the Secretary-General yesterday about the situation on the ground (see S/PV.8185). This is hell on Earth; the scale of the human suffering and destruction is unbearable. The suffering of the Syrian people, while primarily the responsibility of the Syrian regime, brings shame on all of us in the Security Council.

Let us be very clear about the main cause of this hell on Earth. It is the direct result of an escalation by

the Syrian regime of its aerial bombardment of civilian areas, using cluster bombs and chemical weapons and systematically killing hundreds of its own civilians. As others in this Chamber have said today, these are breaches of international humanitarian law and are war crimes. The United Kingdom will be unrelenting in its campaign to ensure accountability and justice for these crimes using all mechanisms at our disposal.

We owe it to the people of eastern Ghouta to highlight the utter devastation facing them and then to take measures to stop it. According to the Syrian American Medical Society, in the first 48 hours of this week, 250 civilians were killed and 460 injured. Those who survived these attacks have been further targeted by the regime while trying to get help for their injuries. There have been 22 separate attacks on 20 different hospitals in the three days since Monday. We applaud the incredible work of the brave doctors on the ground who risk their own lives to save others. And like the Netherlands, we salute the heroes of the White Helmets who have demonstrated incredible bravery, courage and resilience to save the lives of thousands of Syrians on all sides of this conflict.

From the start of the conflict, the Al-Assad regime has peddled the myth that all of those opposing Al-Assad are terrorists. This is manifestly not the case. The people of eastern Ghouta are not terrorists. Jabhat Al-Nusra has only a small presence in eastern Ghouta: its fighters number less than a quarter of 1 per cent of the population of that area. Nothing can justify the barbaric bombardment we have seen in recent days or the blocking of humanitarian aid or the denial of medical evacuations. We also condemn the mortar shelling from eastern Ghouta of civilian areas of Damascus and attacks against the Russian embassy in that city.

The Security Council has failed to uphold its responsibilities in Syria. We all know why this is the case, but we have all agreed that there can be no military solution to the conflict — only a political one. The actions of the Al-Assad regime in recent weeks and the military escalation in an area guaranteed by Russia and Iran as a de-escalation zone show cynical disregard by the regime for every member of the Security Council and for our resolutions. It is therefore vital that we all send a clear and unified message in response.

The solution to the situation is not difficult. We need to see an immediate cessation of hostilities, including an immediate end to the aerial bombing of eastern Ghouta. If everyone in this Chamber were to commit unequivocally to this today, it could have an impact on the ground. It could save the lives of thousands of innocent men, women and children who are being killed as we speak here in this Chamber today. We therefore welcome the draft resolution put forward into blue by you, Mr. President, and by the delegation of Sweden, and we look forward to a vote later today.

In conclusion, yesterday we discussed the principles of the United Nations Charter, which our predecessors drafted in the name of the peoples of the world to help save succeeding generations from the scourge of war (see S/PV.8185). It is clear that we have fallen woefully short of this aim. We have failed the people of eastern Ghouta. But let us reverse this trend today. Let us adopt the draft resolution and take the concrete actions needed to ease the suffering in this zone of death and destruction.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): Equatorial Guinea thanks the Russian Federation for convening this meeting of the Security Council and hopes to contribute to the adoption of a decision aimed at alleviating the enormous suffering and regrettable loss of human life in eastern Ghouta and other parts of Syria. We thank the representative of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his informative briefing.

For the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, the changing humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta requires urgent action to alleviate the critical state of affairs of the most vulnerable members of the civilian population. In recent days, the number of victims and amount of material damage to infrastructure have increased considerably, and the international community is obliged to take some urgent action so as to halt the ongoing loss of lives, mostly of children and women.

We reiterate the appeal made by the delegation of Equatorial Guinea on 14 February for the parties to the conflict to allow humanitarian aid to reach those most in need (see S/PV. 8181). The cessation of hostilities is imperative in order to ensure safe access for relief teams, the distribution of humanitarian aid and the evacuation of the wounded and sick. Equatorial Guinea calls on all parties to the conflict to take the necessary steps to cease hostilities.

Frank, direct and inclusive dialogue is the only viable way out of the Syrian crisis. The Council must redouble its efforts and persuade the opponents to return to the negotiating table. In that sense, resolution 2254 (2015) remains a valid instrument. The recent history of this conflict has taught us the devastating implications that it can have for the entire region. A definitive and sustainable solution to the conflict is in the interests of all the countries of the world.

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea urgently calls on all parties to the conflict, be they directly or indirectly involved, to declare a ceasefire with immediate effect that will be respected and guaranteed by all parties so as to allow for the evacuation of civilians and the delivery of medical care, drinking water and food that will save hundreds of human lives. Even as we debate this issue here in the Chamber, the people of eastern Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria are on the verge of perishing. We must consider any proposal to be submitted from the humanitarian perspective, taking into account the suffering of the population of eastern Ghouta and Syria.

Mr. Llorentty Solíz (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation thanks the delegation of Russia for having asked the presidency to convene this meeting, for I think it very important to exchange views about what is happening in Syria. We also grateful for the briefing by Mr. Mark Locock.

Bolivia reiterates its regret that the crisis in Syria has to date led to so many lives being lost and so much destruction. According to Mr. Lowcock's office, more than 500,000 people have died since the beginning of the conflict, 13.1 million people require humanitarian assistance, of whom 2.9 million are trapped in besieged or hard-to-reach, and 6.9 million persons have been displaced internally. We regret that recent events have led to more people dying or needing humanitarian assistance. We call for the earliest possible beginning of demining operations and for the provision of humanitarian assistance — such as to the city of Raqqa — in order to facilitate the safe and dignified return of the families that were displaced as a result of the conflict.

We also regret that the latest events in Syria have once again served to underscore the urgent need to revitalize the Geneva political process, while strengthening the tangible results achieved in Astana and Sochi, in consultation, of course, with all the parties concerned. We reiterate what several of our colleagues have said during this meeting: there is no military solution to the situation in Syria, only a political one.

We also again reiterate our great gratitude for the work being done by the staff of the humanitarian assistance agencies and groups on the ground. We demand that the parties involved comply with their obligations under international law, in particular international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

We reiterate to the parties involved that they must respect the agreements and the de-escalation zones, as well as avoid attacks on civilian facilities — such residential areas, schools and hospitals — in line with international humanitarian law, so as to ensure the protection of civilians and unrestricted access for humanitarian agencies to provide much-needed assistance.

I understand that we all agree with those principles, as they are basic, fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. Each and every one of us has spoken repeatedly about the obligations of the Security Council under the Charter of the United Nations, including its highest responsibility in terms of the maintenance of international peace and security. Nevertheless, my delegation cannot agree with double standards being applied on any issue, and much less on humanitarian ones. We must not drag down the Security Council by using it as an instrument for a different agenda. Nor, as we have also said several times, should we allow the Council to become an echo chamber where we repeatedly recite well-known areas of war.

In referring to double standards, I will desist from referring to the humanitarian situation in other places around the world. I will limit myself just to Syria. My delegation is surprised, and does not understand, at how the Security Council has not even been able to express itself on the terrorist attacks on the Russian Embassy in Damascus, a member the Council. We have counted six such attacks in the past two weeks, followed by silence on the part of the Council. That should draw our attention as to double standards.

I repeat that we totally reject the politicization of any humanitarian issue. We know that the situation in Syria is urgent. We need to think very carefully about how we can address each of these situations, given that each has its particular characteristics.

With regard to the draft resolution that has been circulated for the Council's consideration, first of all, my delegation would like to sincerely express its gratitude for the efforts of the delegations of Sweden and Kuwait. We have seen them work with great dedication, consulting with the various delegations as part of what of course is a complicated process. That is the nature of negotiations. We hope that the various calls for the Council to do something will come to fruition. . However, I think we have to recognize that putting to a vote a draft resolution, as several delegations have called for today, in the knowledge that it will not be adopted by the Council shows that the goal is not of a humanitarian nature, the aim is political. Putting to a vote a draft resolution while knowing that it will not be adopted means that the goal is not to alleviate the humanitarian situation but to garner a few headlines in the media. That is why we say that we should avoid making the Council an instrument for political ends.

We very much welcome the fact that the Russian delegation has put forward language to enable us to continue the negotiations, which is essential. I agree with what my colleague the Ambassador of Sweden said, that is, the Council is being tested in alleviating the humanitarian situation in Syria. The Council is indeed being tested, and that test is to achieve unity in the Council. If we do not, then the meeting at which the draft resolution is put to the vote will go down in history as just a few headlines. But it will come to nothing and will in no way alleviate the humanitarian situation in Syria.

I therefore issue a fraternal call on my colleagues the members of the Security Council — especially my beloved brothers the Ambassadors of Sweden and Kuwait — that we do everything we can to send out a signal for there to be a change in direction with regard to what the Council has been doing repeatedly over the past months, and show that by being united we will in some way be able to meet the expectations of the rest of the membership and meet the responsibilities assigned to us by the Charter.

Mr. Tanoh-Boutchoue (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I wish to thank the Russian Federation for having called for this meeting.

I also thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his helpful briefing on the latest developments in the humanitarian situation in Syria, which has reached a critical threshold.

Côte d'Ivoire remains deeply concerned by the ongoing deterioration of the humanitarian situation, largely due to the resurgence of fighting on the ground, particularly in eastern Ghouta where since Monday, I regret to say, 40 civilians have been killed and more than 150 wounded, and many hospitals and schools have been destroyed. In the face of this extreme escalation of hostilities, my delegation would like, following the call issued yesterday in this Chamber by Secretary-General António Guterres (see S/PV.8185), to appeal to the sense of responsibility of the parties involved to end the tragedy of eastern Ghouta. It urges them to exercise restraint with a view to an immediate cessation of hostilities in order to enable the resumption of the delivery of humanitarian aid, including medical evacuations, to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian population.

Côte d'Ivoire reiterates its conviction and principled position that the response to the crisis in Syria cannot be military. On the contrary, it should be pursued through an inclusive dialogue and political process, as provided for in the road map set out by resolution 2254 (2015).

Finally, in the light of the tragic humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta — which Mr. Lowcock so somberly described earlier — Côte d'Ivoire supports the draft resolution proposed by the delegations of Kuwait and Sweden, calling for a cessation of hostilities for a period of 30 days with a view to allowing immediate humanitarian access to the besieged populations of the region. The Council must set aside all political calculations and other distractions and undertake the commendable task of rescuing the inhabitants of eastern Ghouta and other regions of Syria, who also happen to be Syrians, from the hell in which they are living.

Mr. Temenov (Kazakhstan): We thank the delegation of the Russian Federation for initiating this open briefing on the very critical humanitarian issue in Syria, and thank Mark Lowcock for his update.

Like others, we express our serious concern about the continued severity of the devastating humanitarian situation in Syria, including in eastern Ghouta, Idlib and northern Hama governorates, Rukban and Raqqa. Kazakhstan urges all parties within and outside the country to prevent further violence and enable humanitarian organizations to access and assist people in need. Since early February, with the military offensive against eastern Ghouta, there have been more than 1,200 civilian casualties.

We truly need a cessation of hostilities and all military operations throughout Syria to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid and services and the medical evacuation of the critically sick and wounded, in accordance with international law. Kazakhstan considers it critical for the Security Council to adopt a workable and effective resolution on a cessation of hostilities in Syria, a draft of which is now being considered by Council members. Kazakhstan calls on all parties to find consensus and unite in their efforts to undertake an immediate suspension of all war activities in eastern Ghouta and other parts of Syria, allowing humanitarian aid to reach all those in need, as well as the evacuation of all patients requiring urgent treatment that cannot be provided there.

My delegation supports the five requests identified by the Emergency Relief Coordinator on 11 January during his mission to Syria, and calls upon all parties to facilitate the implementation of these five requests and others, as specified in relevant Security Council resolutions, so as to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2018. In this context, we look forward to a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the guarantor countries of the Astana process — namely, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran — who intend to gather in Astana in March to discuss all issues related to recent developments on the ground. The timing and the specific agenda are currently being specified. In this regard, the next round of the Astana process itself is scheduled to be held after the aforementioned meeting of the Foreign Ministers.

Lastly, in May 2017 Kazakhstan welcomed the adoption of the memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic. They have lessened hostilities between the conflicting parties. However, the ceasefire agreements in these zones are currently being violated. We attach the utmost importance to compliance by all conflicting parties with ceasefire agreements and their enforcement by the guarantor States. Likewise, each of the agreements reached in Astana should not remain on paper, but must be strictly complied with.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic and urge him to limit his statement to five minutes in accordance with Security Council note S/2017/507.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): The delegation of my country was not aware of your decision, Sir, to limit my statement to five minutes. I oppose that decision and therefore reserve the right to express the views of my country in this important meeting devoted to the situation in my country.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): The representative of the Russian Federation has asked to make a further statement.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We fail to understand, Sir, why you have proposed limiting the statement of the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic on the important issue under discussion. His country is directly involved and where everything being discussed is taking place. We must afford an opportunity for the representative of Syria to speak for the full amount of time required to deliver his statement. I do not believe we need any artificial limits on his statement.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I did not make a decision. I simply encouraged the representative of Syria to adhere to the provisions of note S/2017/507.

I again give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Once again, I reiterate that we were not aware of note S/2017/507. I believe that this act is unjust and raises many issues to which I already intended to refer in my statement. I hope that everyone will be patient enough to listen to the statement I shall make on behalf of the Government of my country. I shall not deliver a personal statement. All speakers have spoken on behalf of their Governments, and I shall do the same. I encourage all members to listen carefully to what I have to say.

As I talk here at this moment, hundreds of rockets and mortars are targeting the capital, Damascus. To date, they have injured 37 people, including six children, and led to a number of martyrs, including two children. That comes as no surprise. As the Council is aware, every time a Security Council meeting is held to discuss the Syrian situation, there is a massacre here and a suicide bombing there, as well as the killing of civilians in some Syrian cities. We have seen not dozens, but rather hundreds of massacres over the past seven years. Mr. Lowcock did not get this information the way he gets messages from what he calls humanitarian workers in eastern Ghouta who know about international humanitarian law. Mr. Lowcock,

did not solicit the views of the Syrian Government, which we have expressed in hundreds of letters sent to him and to the Council. All those who in this meeting have used the word "regime" to refer to my country are neither objective nor impartial. They reveal their countries' involvement in the ongoing terrorist crisis in my country.

We thank the delegation of the Russian Federation for convening this meeting to give us the opportunity to once again present the reality of the suffering of civilians as a result of the practices of armed terrorist groups or, as some call them, moderate armed opposition groups. Over the past seven years, they have been sowing death and destruction wherever they have operated. They have used civilians as human shields. They have targeted hospitals and schools, turning them into military centres. They have hurled missiles and rockets indiscriminately at residential and populated areas.

Of course, as the Permanent Representative of France said before leaving this meeting, all of this is a form of resistance. He referred to the terrorists who bombard Damascus as the "resistance" that the Syrian regime is trying to suppress. This meeting is particularly important, as some actors — especially the United States of America and the so-called international coalition — have moved from the stage of aggression by proxy through their support for terrorism to the stage of direct aggression. Those actors have recruited terrorists from all four corners of the world. They call them jihadists and send them to Syria. Whenever terrorists have failed, those actors have been there — militarily, politically, through the media and the United Nations — to intervene in order to achieve what their terrorist proxies failed to achieve.

Let us be clear. Some Council members — and I specifically mean the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France — would like to deprive the Syrian Government of its constitutional and sovereign right to defending its territories and people, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations back when we had wise founding fathers and international law and as guaranteed by all United Nations resolutions on counter-terrorism.

Today, I have heard references to the draft resolution contained in document S/2018/146, on humanitarian issues. The penholders, Kuwait and Sweden, have been working on it for several weeks. I thank them for their efforts. However, those efforts are deeply flawed. The penholders did not coordinate with the Syrian delegation at all. They did not even ask to hear my country's view on the draft resolution that concerns it.

Let us imagine for a moment that hundreds of terrorists had used the Bois de Boulogne as a centre to target civilians in Paris, launching dozens of missiles every day. Would we have seen a draft resolution calling for a humanitarian truce to give the moderate armed French opposition the opportunity to regain its power and launch missiles targeting Paris?

Let us imagine for a moment that hundreds of terrorists had used Central Park here in New York as a centre to target civilians in Manhattan, and had launched dozens of missiles every day. Would we have seen a draft resolution calling for the medical evacuation of the moderate armed American opposition?

Let us imagine for a moment that hundreds of terrorists had used Hyde Park as a centre to target civilians in London, launching dozens of missiles daily. Would we have seen a draft resolution calling for the delivery of humanitarian aid to the moderate armed British opposition? Would we have seen statements by high-level Secretariat officials, such as Mr. Lowcock, calling for stopping the fight against armed groups that they describe as non-State armed opposition groups? Unfortunately, that is how United Nations documents refer to terrorists nowadays — non-State armed opposition groups.

Of course, those are all hypothetical scenarios that might seem far-fetched. However, that is the reality in Syria. It is the tragedy that we are seeing in Syrian cities every day, including the city of Damascus and its inhabitants. It is a bitter reality that the Syrian Government is facing as a result of the erroneous approaches adopted by the United Nations and the positions of some of its Member States. Damascus is the oldest populated city in history. It is seeing destruction, death and sorrow every day as a result of missiles, mortars and rockets launched by armed terrorist groups operating in eastern Ghouta. These terrorist groups — the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham, the Al-Nusra Front and affiliated groups — are designated as terrorist groups in the Security Council. Today, 8 million people live in Damascus, among them hundreds of thousands who fled armed groups that attacked their villages and their homes in many parts of Syria, including eastern Ghouta.

The United Nations today is going through a professional and moral crisis that is unfathomable. High-level Secretariat officials see no harm in adopting the positions of Governments that sponsor terrorism in my country. They are directly involved in distorting facts, manipulating figures, using insidious phrases and terminology, and depending on unreliable sources in their statements and reports. Of course, I cannot list all of those scandals today. I will only remind the Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Fact-Finding Mission report (S/2017/567), issued in June 2017. The report states that among the open sources on which it relied was the testimony of British doctor Shajul Islam. For those who do not know who Mr. Islam is, he is a foreign terrorist fighting for the Al-Nusra Front in Idlib. He was convicted in the United Kingdom and was not allowed to practice medicine there as he was involved in crimes related to terrorism, such as kidnapping British journalist John Cantlie. That is but one example of some misleading reports issued by the Secretariat.

We are convinced that those abhorren practices will not stop and that some United Nations officials will ignore the serious information that we have conveyed to them about armed terrorist groups fabricating the story that the Syrian Government used toxic chemical substances against civilians in eastern Ghouta. Those groups are training some of their members to pretend that they have been exposed to toxic substances. Of course, those scenes are broadcast by well-known networks and correspondents of Mr. Lowcock, and the Syrian Arab Army is blamed for it. Although we have sent hundreds of letters to the Secretary-General, the President of the Security Council and specialized United Nations agencies specialized in counter-terrorism and the prohibition of chemical weapons, we are sure that some at the United Nations will not hesitate to believe that story and blame the Syrian Government. That is simply because certain agendas in the Organization compel some to join in the extortion of the Syrian Arab Republic and its allies that are fighting terrorism on behalf of all those present.

For over two months now, the Syrian Government has been sending letters almost daily to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council documenting the number of missiles used, which have amounted in the past few weeks to almost 1,200. We have been also documenting the human and material losses of civilians in the city of Damascus as a result of being targeted by terrorists groups in eastern Ghouta. However, in its statements and appeals the Secretariat has no problem ignoring the suffering of 8 million people in Damascus. It has not hesitated to participate in the misleading campaign launched by some States to protect a few thousand members of armed terrorists groups in eastern Ghouta. They are sacrificing 8 million civilians in Damascus to protect a few thousand terrorists in eastern Ghouta. This is scene in short.

Both international and United Nations sources are spreading news of a stifling siege on eastern Ghouta. That is not consistent with the indisputable reality on the ground. We are talking here about a vital area that is the main source of food for the city of Damascus. Commercial trucks constantly move back and forth to Ghouta. The Syrian Government has facilitated the delivery of humanitarian aid to people in eastern Ghouta, when conditions on the ground have allowed. We have also approved medical evacuations to Government hospitals in Damascus. The truth that we all know, and even high-level Secretariat officials know, is that armed terrorist groups are controlling the humanitarian aid that enters eastern Ghouta. They distribute it among its members and deprive civilians of any of it.

There is another truth that the Secretariat is ignoring. Residents of eastern Ghouta have taken to the street in protest against the practices of terrorists who point their guns at innocent people. Of course, those besieged innocents are also sending messages, but Mr. Lowcock's radar is not receiving them. I would like to ask the Secretariat the following. How does it justify ignoring the reports and information that the Syrian Government has presented on thousands of hostages and kidnapped people being detained by armed terrorist groups in eastern Ghouta in the so-called Attawba prison? They require immediate medical evacuation. The United Nations is ignoring video footage posted by armed groups showing women and children, among the hostages, being pushed into metal cages and left on the street. It is a painful scene reminiscent of the times of slavery. It is true insanity that the Secretary-General spoke of yesterday and has been echoed by some colleagues today. Yes, there is terrorist insanity in eastern Ghouta and we must put a stop to it.

What is even worse is that some in the Secretariat are trying to use the agreement on de-escalation zones to distort the facts and ignore repeated violations perpetrated by these armed terrorist groups. They are

being instructed from the outside by actors that some of them are present in this Chamber. They are instructed to target Syrian military sites and launch attacks using rockets, missiles and car bombs on residential neighbourhoods in Damascus.

These groups operating in eastern Ghouta that kill civilians in Damascus daily are armed terrorists groups, regardless of any change to their names, affiliations or alliances. Today they are Jaysh al-Islam, the Al-Rahman Corps, the Dawn of Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. Yesterday they were the Islamic Front, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Al-Nusra Front. I invite all members of the Council to take a look at the websites of those groups and the satellite television channels that Western satellites are helping broadcast. It will become apparent that they all share the same Wahhabi terrorist ideology, and that they all call for takfiri ideas and the annihilation of others. Any attempt to change their names and description by calling them moderate opposition or non-state armed groups will not change their terrorist reality. It will not prevent us, as the Government, from defending our citizens with the support of our allies, and fighting terrorism pursuant to the Council's resolutions on counter-terrorism.

Some among us today are exploiting the suffering of the Syrian people and trading in their blood. They are demanding accountability while being direct partners in supporting and defending terrorism. They are involved in direct military aggression against my people, as was the case in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Africa and Latin America. The dilemma that we are facing today is that the mechanism of work inside the United Nations is being held hostage to political and financial polarization. As a result, this mechanism of work completely disregard the crimes of the so-called international coalition led by the United States of America.

As mentioned by my colleague the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, the international coalition completely destroyed Raqqa, killing hundreds of civilians and destroying shelters, infrastructure and bridges over the Euphrates river and everywhere in Syria, under the pretext of fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It used internationally prohibited weapons against civilians in Syria, including American Napalm, just as it did in Viet Nam. The international coalition targeted Syrian armed forces and allied forces more than once in order to break the siege on ISIL. The coalition and its militias made a deal with ISIL so that ISIL fighters, their families and their heavy weapons could leave Raqqa and other places in order to fight the Syrian forces and their allies elsewhere.

The United Nations is completely disregarding the repeated aggressions of Israeli occupation forces on our territories as part of its support to armed terrorist groups. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations is clueless as to what is going on in the Golan. The United Nations itself is completely disregarding Turkish aggressions and violations against Syrian sovereignty, and the direct military aggression initiated now by Turkey on Afrin. Nobody has addressed this issue in their statements.

In conclusion, responding to those who fear that eastern Ghouta might become a second Aleppo, I invite them to go to Aleppo today and see with their own eyes how millions, not thousands, have resumed their normal lives after Aleppo was liberated from terrorism. Indeed, eastern Ghouta will become a second Aleppo, as will Idlib and all areas that have suffered under the terrorism of armed groups in Syria.

We will not succumb no longer to the extortion of those who have supported terrorism in Syria. We will not be complacent to the plans of the Governments of the five States that met in Washington, D.C., last month to divide Syria and ensure the failure of both the Sochi conference and the political process as a whole. That news was reported today in the United Kingdom.

We will not sit idly by while those who use terrorism, take unjust economic measures and wage direct military aggression against the Syrian people seek to achieve their cheap political agendas. Rest assured that history will soon admit that we and our allies have fought a war on behalf of the entire world against terrorism, which is being supported by Governments that soon will be held accountable by their people and world public opinion. Those Governments have invested all they can in terrorism until it reached their cities, their own citizens and all safe places throughout the world.

When I look at some of the faces in the Chamber and see the political hypocrisy therein, I recall the famous adage by the Great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who said: "Rest assured, hell is big enough for everyone. There is no need for people to compete so fiercely to be the worst."

The meeting rose at 2.10 p.m.